It is virtually inconceivable to imagine these days that a successful politician could simultaneously be an established scientist and a significant religious figure. Yet, in the latter part of the 18th century within western Europe and North America more than one notable would fill such a bill. So much for human progress.

Joseph Priestly (1733-1804) was an Englishman who rose from obscurity to be an important player in both English and American science, politics and religion. In the *Invention of Air* Steven Johnson explores the "why" behind Priestly's accomplishments more so than the "what" - although the book is perfectly adequate as a biography as well. Johnson's exploration of Priestly's life convincingly concludes that it was Priestly's fanatical dedication to the free and open exchange of ideas that accounted for all he accomplished - and that was monumental, indeed.

Priestly is best known as the discoverer of oxygen, which turns out, in fact, to be not quite true. His scientific "style" would not be seen today as very promising. Priestly's approach to science was to let discovery take him where it would, to explore with seemingly limitless energy any topic he fancied and to broadcast as widely as possible every step (and misstep) along the way to everyone who would pay attention. Priestly began his career as a cleric (he was a co-founder of the Unitarian Church and author of the influential *History of the Corruption of Christianity*) with the leisure time to explore science as an amateur. His first major contribution was not new discovery but a history of the science of electricity which he had the audacity to propose to the famous London Club of Honest Whigs (that included Benjamin Franklin among its loosely-defined membership). The notables in the Club (and those of its later morph The Lunar Society which included Boulton, Watt, Wedgwood and E. Darwin) were so impressed with Priestly that they enthusiastically supported his scientific endeavors. Over time, Priestly's "shotgun approach" paid off handsomely with discovery after discovery. He acquired an array of both sophisticated and simple instrumentation with which to carry out his studies - which, besides oxygen, included soda water, photosynthesis and respiration. Unable to contain his political and religious opinions anymore than his science, however, got Priestly ("Gunpowder Joe") into serious trouble that resulted in having his Birmingham house and laboratory burnt down by an angry mob and his exile to Pennsylvania. There Priestly started anew and picked up where he left off with a new house, new lab, firm friendships with Franklin and Jefferson, and not-so-firm relationship with Sam Adams that almost cost him a second exile.
Although Priestly stubbornly stuck to the errant concept of "dephlogisticated air" rather than Lavoisier's now-accepted concept of oxygen as a unique gas, it was Priestly's prescient espousal of the concept of global ecology that is viewed today (and by some of his contemporaries like Jefferson and Franklin) to be an even more important contribution to science than the output of his laboratory experiments.

A few historical woodcut illustrations, brief notes, short bibliography and index round out this worthy text.

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